I was there as the sound of shots split the air

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

DALLAS

The first shot, maybe because it was so unexpected, sounded to me like the backfire of a Dallas police motorcycle.

Standing on Elm Street, at the corner of Houston Street, I glanced slightly to my left to identify the noise and, almost immediately, a second and, shortly afterward, a third rang out.

In those scant seconds, what had begun as an exciting, almost festive fall afternoon suddenly churned toward fear, disbelief and chaos; finally to a rumbling stomach and a heavy heart.

I recall explicitly my reactions for a brief period, but some of the twists and turns for the next few minutes don't come back so easily 25 years later — not even with the help of my notes (written hastily on two envelopes) and the sharing of remembrances with others close by.

I'll never forget the large black woman holding a small child, wearing a dress almost the color of the pink suit worn by Jackie Kennedy.

The president's limousine drifted slowly by as it made the hard left at the Texas School Book Depository building, and a woman with her shouted, "Hey, look, she's got your dress on!," and the woman waved wildly, almost dropping the youngster as she bristled with pride.

Seconds later, possibly even before the third shot hit, people started moving. One tall man in a Western hat raised his hands, booming out, "Hey, hey," as if his assertiveness could stop whatever was happening.

People started yelling, grabbing at each other, even falling into each other. Cops, both uniformed and in plain clothes, darted this way and that. A man close to me holding a small boy gently laid him down and covered him with his body.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the lady in the pink dress thrust her child toward her friend, clutch her stomach and retch on the sidewalk.

Several people pointed toward the depository building, at the disappearing motorcade, at the policeman driving his motorcycle up on the grass to our right.

"The president's been hit," one man cried out. "Oh my God, the president's been hit."

"I think Lyndon Johnson was hit too," added another.

Within five minutes I was interviewing as many people as I could stop. Some were crying, others surprisingly composed.

Later that day, I would learn and

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SEE

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see a lot more. Ten hours after the first shot I would still be taking notes. In between I would go on the chase for the assassin, see the cops capture him in the Texas Theater, interview saddened officers at J.D. Tippit's home and find at least three apartments where Oswald had lived — including one where I interrupted two near-nude lovers who didn't want to talk about Lee Harvey Oswald.

It was a most bizarre and disturbing day — the first of many I spent digging, interviewing, following investigative leads. Often I would awake sharply at night, having replayed part of the drama in my dreams.

For months it drained me as I looked for answers that were not there.

Just as they aren't 25 years later.

Though I honestly tried, even years and years later I simply could not push myself away from that day, what happened and what it caused later as a generation went almost crazy trying to prove it all happened the way they figured it should have.

No matter where I went — from The Dallas News to Newsweek, from the Dallas Times Herald to ABC's "20/20" and to The Washington Times — every time a new conspiracy theory came along, every time there was a new investigation, every time somebody confessed to being involved in the president's death, I would have to grab a telephone, or a train or plane, and deal with it — check it out.

At last count, I had investigated at least 75 different conspiracy tales. I have had five different men confess to me they were involved in the president's death. I have had people accuse Jack Ruby, Lyndon Johnson, Clay Shaw, assorted Russians, Cubans, Mexicans, an Italian or two, Frenchmen, H.L. Hunt, a handful of Mafia figures — even a dissident member of the Kennedy family.

Though I have not found any answers, I keep an open mind, hoping that someday, *if* there is something provable out there, I'll find it.

But this was all ahead of me. Far ahead of me that Nov. 22, when the world seemed young.

The day started out much like any other Friday except for an unmistakable hint of excitement and anticipation in the air.

I was not assigned to help cover the festivities, and, frankly, I felt left out. Throughout the morning I had done everything but turn handstands to get noticed by City Editor John E. King Jr.

I grabbed my best buddy, Larry Grove, and we headed for the cafeteria to grab a cup of coffee before he rushed off to see the president.

As we sat there, Jerry Haynes from WFAA-TV, our sister company across the street, came in and plopped down. The talk, at our table and across the room, was of the Kennedy visit.

It was almost 11:30 a.m. Larry got up. Mr. Kennedy and his party were to arrive at Dallas' Love Field in 10 or 15 minutes.

About that time, I noticed a man in a black hat, dark blue suit and wide red tie pause at the cashier's area. He paid for what looked like ham and eggs and plopped down nearby, just two tables to my right.

"There's that smart-ass Jack Ruby," I said to Mr. Haynes. "I guess he's up here trying to get publicity from Tony Zoppi."

Mr. Zoppi was an entertainment columnist who occasionally wrote about Ruby and his two sleazy nightclubs, the Carousel and Vegas.

There was no greeting between us. I had seen Ruby far too often, and did not like him.

In 1963 in Dallas there were few clubs to attend, and those that sold drinks closed early. The Vegas, as an after-hours club, offered no liquor but one could get a "near-beer" or Coke for a couple bucks and see a comedian and a stripper.

The Jack Ruby I knew was an overbearing weirdo, a loudmouthed showoff whom I had seen at fires, accidents, bars and the newspaper. He seemed to be everywhere news happened or people gathered. I wondered what he got out of it; still do.

And, I had seen him beat up drunks on at least two occasions — totally without provocation. I never saw him with a woman and wondered about that.

By 11:45, I had left the cafeteria, as Ruby leaned slightly leeward in an attempt to peer up the cashier's dress.

Had I only grabbed him then and held onto him!

I headed out for the City Hall press room, where I figured my buddy James Ewell would be covering from the third-floor press room and only a few yards from where the Kennedy motorcade would be slipping onto Main Street for its final few blocks.

Mr. Ewell wasn't there and homicide cops had filled the window, so I turned and shoved back out into the street, determined to get a good viewing position along Main Street.

Before long, three fellows from the district attorney's office stopped me and suggested I go with them. They were headed back for their office, at Main and Houston, in the County Courts Building. "Plenty of windows we can watch from there," said one.

It took 10 or 15 minutes to get back down to the courts building, and we ran into scores of press people, lawyers and county workers. Everybody, it seemed, was out to watch. I decided to stay on the street, and I eased around Main and Houston to where the crowds were lighter.

As I walked aimlessly down Houston, I saw Sally Holt of The News, waving her camera to and fro, eagerly awaiting what she thought would be historic photos of the most important political event ever held in Dallas.

Later I would see her back at The News, in tears, explaining that while unloading her film she had dropped it on the floor, exposing it.

Since she had been shooting from behind the motorcade as the president's limo headed toward the turn onto Elm, she would have had a clear shot of the sixth-floor window of the depository building — and perhaps of whomever was leaning intently out that window with his rifle.

Because most of the witnesses seemed to be pointing to the depository building or claiming they believed the shots came from there, soon the building was cordoned off. The "word" from cops in the area was "He's up there. We've got him trapped in the building."

Police were running in and out of the building and collaring witnesses, any witnesses.

Several newsmen tried to get inside, but were turned away abruptly.

I learned early that while covering a breaking criminal event, one should always find a police radio and stay as close to it as possible. I did so, and soon I heard a rambling, excited voice call out for help.

It was a citizen who was using Police Officer J.D. Tippit's radio to call in to report that Officer Tippit had been shot.

"I think he's hurt bad," the caller said, as he gave the dispatcher the location.

It was about three miles from where I stood. This must be part of this, I thought, as I grabbed a WFAA-TV newsman and cameraman and related what I had heard. With Vic Robertson and me waving frantically out the windows and Mal Couch driving relentlessly through intersections, we got to the Tippit murder scene pretty fast.

We almost immediately ran into Helen Markham, a fidgety woman who had been standing on a corner waiting for her bus just a few yards from Mr. Tippit's police cruiser when she saw a man shoot the officer.

She had no doubt about what she saw, though the description she gave me of the killer — she told me he was stocky — later was used by conspiracy theorists to cast doubt on her testimony. We found a couple other people, sisters as I recall, or maybe sisters-in-law, who had seen the man run from the scene.

William W. Scoggins, a cab driver who was sitting in his car, eating his lunch, told us he saw the officer's car approach, stop, the officer get out, heard the shots and then saw the killer run by him to escape.

"Man, he was within a dozen feet of me," Mr. Scoggins said. "He was kinda loping, trotting, with this pistol in his left hand."

Did he saw anything?

"He muttered something like 'Poor dumb cop' or 'Poor damn cop,' " he said.

We didn't know how far behind the killer we were. I thought I'd check in, but couldn't find a telephone. I gravitated back to where I could hear the police radio, this time in a parked car.

A minute later I heard a dispatch calling police to the Texas Theater where a suspicious person was said to be. By the time I ran the six blocks or so, a dozen or so people were milling around and I had seen several others run inside.

A pretty woman in her early 30s was telling people, "He's inside. I don't think he bought a ticket. I don't remember what he looked like." I ran inside like I belonged there. I hesitated on whether to go upstairs to the balcony, where somebody trying to hide might well go, or downstairs.

I stood there momentarily and it dawned on me that I was scared to go either way.

As I pressed myself up against a wall right by the lobby door, a couple cops ran almost over me.

My adrenalin pushing me where my guts didn't really want to go, I stepped inside that door, just as the house lights were raised slightly. The movie was still playing. It looked like 12 or 13 moviegoers were there, mostly singles.

As I wondered what to do next, four or five officers walked matter-of-factly up the aisle from front to back. Two were close enough to me that I could see their faces clearly. Then one stopped abruptly and turned to a man sitting alone five seats from the aisle in the third row from the rear and snapped, "Get up!" or "Get out!"

The officer moved rapidly for his size. So did the smaller guy, who jumped up and shouted something I didn't totally hear. As the man threw his hands up, the first cop, N.M. McDonald, reached around his waist, I assumed for a gun. A second later the man hit the officer with a glancing blow with his left hand, then a solid right.

It all happened so fast.

Before I could run — and I think I wanted desperately to do so — at least three other officers jumped in, a couple from the row behind. One shouted, "He's got a gun." There were a couple of grunts, the sound of a cracking seat and a couple of other remarks.

"We've got him," shouted one officer as he tried to pull the suspect out the west side of the aisle. A couple others were pulling just as hard to get him out the other aisle.

Finally three officers walked the suspect, who, of course, turned out to be Oswald, out the front door and put him into an unmarked police car.

"I protest this police brutality," Oswald said at least twice in a shrill, birdlike voice.

At least 200 persons had gathered in front of the theater by then, and as the cops pushed Oswald quickly through the throng, I heard people shouting, "Kill the son of a bitch" and "Let us have him. We'll kill him."

Mr. Ewell, back at the station, soon learned who the suspect was, but it was quite some time before we knew he had been involved with the president's death also.

Meanwhile, we came up with three Oak Cliff addresses where Oswald had lived, and it was my job to find out all I could about him.

After I had returned to my desk and written page after page of copy — which was superbly weaved into a lead story by columnist Paul Crume — Mr. King suddenly found out nobody had done anything about the Tippit family. I was sent out to attack that unpleasant task.

Fortunately there were several police officers there who could and did fill me in on details so that I didn't have to bother the grieving family.

I monitored events Saturday and went to bed feeling somewhat apprehensive that the Dallas cops had announced they would move Oswald from the city lockup to the county jail the next day, Sunday, at 10 a.m.

As the shock of what happened sank in, many folks were saying that Oswald didn't deserve to live.

"Somebody ought to shoot that damned communist before some high-priced lawyer gets him off," one neighbor said. "I wish I could be drivin' the car that hauls him to the jail," snapped an otherwise quiet man at a barber shop.

So, when I awoke Sunday morning and saw that the transfer had not yet been made, I headed for City Hall. Unshaven. In old clothes. But in a hurry.

It was 11:17 a.m., not more than two minutes after I had eased down the Commerce Street ramp and into the basement, that I heard somebody say, "Here they come," and three or four television lights went immediately on, facing the police department doors.

A couple dozen reporters, held partially in check by cops, lunged forward to see. I was probably 12 to 15 feet from the prisoner and trying to edge closer. Before I made any headway, I saw a dark object dart toward the three men walking toward us.

Then one eerie "pop" and instant turmoil and confusion. At least 10 persons seemed to grab a man or somebody they thought had grabbed him. Arms and legs, occasionally a gun, cursing, shoving. Many shouted orders — not too many moving on them.

They quickly lugged Oswald back a few feet into the book-in room. "Oh no," I thought, standing with stunned disbelief, "not again!"

Then somebody said it was Jack Ruby.